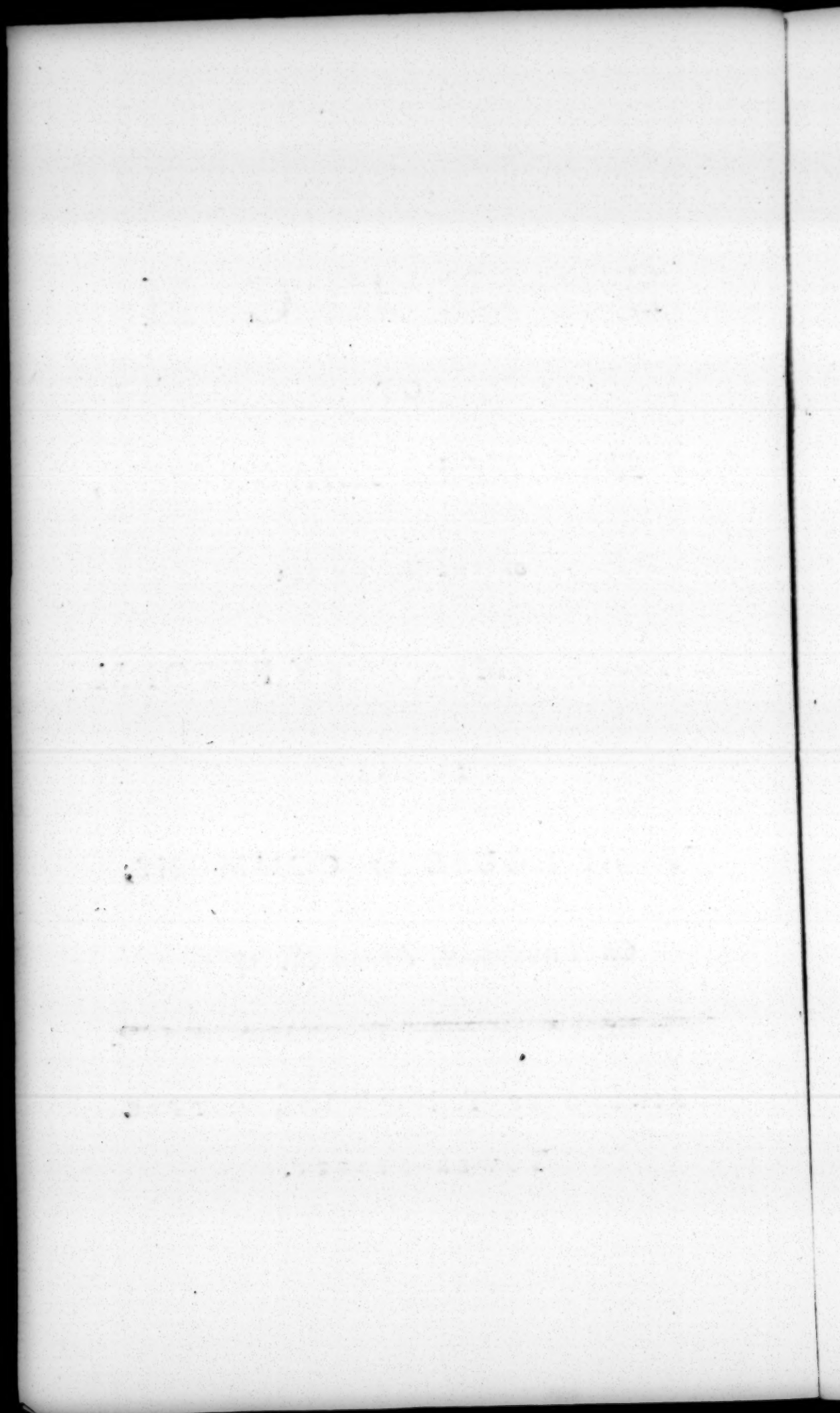


THE
S P E E C H
OF
Sir HERCULES LANGRISHE,
ON THE MOTION FOR
A PARLIAMENTARY REFORM
IN THE
IRISH HOUSE OF COMMONS,
On THURSDAY, APRIL 28, 1785.

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THE SPEECH OF
SIR HERCULES LANGRISHE.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

APRIL 28, 1785.

MR. FLOOD, pursuant to a notice formerly given, made his motion for a Reform of the present mode of electing Representatives to serve in Parliament. Having explained his system, which was nearly copied from that adopted by the Convention, he concluded with moving,

That the House resolve itself into a Committee, to consider of an Instruction to the Committee appointed to prepare a Bill for the more equal Representation of the People in Parliament, to receive the following clause.—That the better to promote *population* in decayed or contracted boroughs, no borough in the province of Ulster, having

having less than 140, or in the other provinces than 70 voters, should be permitted to return more than one Member to Parliament.

SIR HERCULES LANGRISHE then arose, and spoke as follows :

MR. SPEAKER,

THE object of this motion, taken abstractedly, is certainly desirable, and carries with it the recommendation of bearing a strong reference to the great Earl of Chatham's idea of parliamentary reform, which was, "the pouring some young blood into the constitution." Now, Sir, nothing that I know of can *promote population* so effectually as this same infusion of *young blood*. I therefore feel some reluctance in voting against this motion ; but as it comprehends a *part* of a system, which I think in the *whole* inadmissible, I must oppose it. Though the question immediately before you does not, it is true, go to the whole subject of a parliamentary reform, yet the very able speech of the honourable Member who introduced it, so fully explained the *whole plan*, and so strongly enforced the necessity of the measure, that I cannot suffer it to remain under the uncontroverted recommendation of so able an advocate, but must take the liberty to follow him into the subject at large, and state to the House my sentiments on it.

And indeed, Sir, as the various assemblies which have of late been so generally convened
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throughout this country, for the purposes of *peace* and the propagation of *political learning* amongst the lower orders of the people, have displayed so much of their wisdom and eloquence on this subject, I may hope it will not be thought an indecorum, if the House of Commons assume to share in the common privilege; and that *we* may be permitted, with the usual authority of *full and free debate*, to examine the *plan*, the *principle*, and the *progress* of a measure that affects to be a *reformation of Parliament*.

As soon as a restitution of every right, and a concession of every favour that you could *desire* or *demand*, had satisfied every rational wish in the nation, it was natural to expect that the patriot's care should be awakened to look out for something that might provide for the *agitation of the day*, and protect the public mind from the *lassitude of contentment*; for it was much to be feared, in those degenerate days, when the people should see commerce ready to reward their industry, and the best constitution in the world ready to ensure their acquisitions; that they would be but too apt to surrender themselves to the cold dictates of *common sense*, and degrade their high exertions by embracing the condition of *inglorious happiness*. But the public virtue of this country has always been ready to awaken their sensibility to *nobler pursuits*, and cultivate the growth of *unceasing demand*; for
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the public virtue of this country has always supplied us with some spirits so exalted, that they aspire at something *more than liberty*; and whose conceptions of prosperity despise the narrow bounds of *peace and affluence*.

To rescue the people from this *ignoble mediocrity*—to secure them from this *delusive tranquillity*—to keep alive their *cares and fears*, and their *jealousies*, that they may neither slumber nor sleep even in the arms of freedom and peace—the subject of parliamentary reform naturally presented itself, as that of all others most *likely to inflame*, because it was that of all others most *unlikely to be understood*—It was a combination of politics, and jurisprudence, and history, and experiment, and speculation, so complicated as to furnish every thing to *perplex*, and nothing to inform the public mind. The *object* ambiguous, the *means* unascertained, its preachers could attribute to it any perfection they pleased without the hazard of contestation—it was a doctrine that the high priests who expounded it from their altars, explained every one in a manner different from the other—a doctrine on which the several oracles that had been consulted abroad, returned responses full of *ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction*—It was a doctrine to be propagated by *pure faith*, because it was a mystery above the understanding of the people—It was enough that the doctrine was *new*
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and *obscure*, to ensure it some followers amongst a believing multitude; for there never was a false doctrine imposed upon the world, except a doctrine the world could not understand. The missionaries of reform, though they could not, like Mahomet, employ *miracles* to propagate the faith, were, like him, determined to lend it the assistance of the *sword*.

Under these circumstances it naturally followed, that this subject assumed the *sanction of the people*, who knew nothing of the matter; and the force of the nation to be directed against its own tranquillity; it has been cloathed with a degree of authority manifestly affecting to preclude the discussion, and enforce the compliance of Parliament. I do not mean to allude to any expressions that may casually have fallen in the warmth of debate from gentlemen in this House, which ought to be considered as the effusions of ardent feelings and good intentions; but I must observe upon expressions which I have heard every where: we have been told, Sir, that "a parliamentary reform is a measure which the people *are determined* to carry;" That "it was hoped they would not lay down their *arms* till they obtained it." And Gentlemen have prophesied too, "that they would not be *satisfied* without it." Now, Sir, let me only observe, if sentiments like these should ever have escaped from Gentlemen of worth and understanding

ing, we must consider how such ideas would expand themselves in the hot and vacant mind of the *ignorant* and the *tumultuary*.

What do these words import? Why, Sir, these words translated into common English imply, “that the people should *reform* Parliament, by abolishing its authority, and *renovate* the constitution by an act of *violence*,” for every man knows if the people are determined to carry a measure *at all events*, they are determined to carry it whether Parliament approve or not, and if the latter be the case, to substitute *force* in place of *law*, and *arms* in the place of Constitution. And as to prophecies of discontent or tumult; I must say it is, from the frailty and vanity of man, too much to expect, that when he assumes the gift of prophecy, he will not endeavour to *fulfil* his prophecy; at least it may be feared that even if his prophecy goes to *public commotion*, his pride and his passions become interested against any endeavour to prevent that commotion, because that would be an endeavour to falsify his own prediction. I cannot therefore avoid thinking, that such prophecies have more in them of *fabrication* than *foresight*; that they tend more to *promote* than *provide* against the evils they announce; and therefore, if I had the authority of a patriarch, I would call aloud on the people and caution them against such prophets—they may *betray* but cannot *serve* them—
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They may indeed seduce them, like the tribes of old, to wade through a *red sea*, but they would afterwards lead them into *captivity*, or forsake them in the *wilderness*; for they cannot put them into possession of the *land* they have *promised* them.

I know very well that several rational and respectable Gentlemen are of opinion in favour of a *reform*. I see several such in this House, for whose persons and opinions I entertain the utmost respect—I must however take the liberty to say, I differ from them in opinion; and that from my intercourse with the world, I am convinced the sober sense of the nation differs from them too. The rational wishes of the people must always have the greatest weight in this House; but they must flow through the channels of the Constitution, and must be collected, not from the *assertion* of any, however respectable, but by the best *observation* we can make; and my best observation convinces me that Gentlemen are deceived when they state a parliamentary reform as the *darling object* and *fondest wish* of the people. Who, Sir, the fact is impossible! They are not sufficiently acquainted with it to entertain such a predilection. I am sure if you could suppose that possible, you must suppose them more blindly devoted in their fond attachments, even than the sovereign Princes you read of; you suppose them enamoured of an object, without ever having been gratified even by looking at the *picture* of it.

If indeed there could be such a mass of oddity in the human mind, as that the people were in love before-hand with every thing that calls itself reform, I could furnish a seraglio for their raptures. I have in my pocket 17 different plans for the reform of Parliament, and I could collect as many more; because *Reform* is a word to which every reformist annexes his own idea; and plans of reform are as various as the various ideas of the human mind. But I will never believe that the people can devote themselves at once to objects so dissimilar; which differ as much in complexion and disposition as the *Æthiopian* and the *Circassian*. Neither will I believe they could be so weak as to found a passion on *anticipation* or *authority*. I could as soon be persuaded they were in love with the climate of the moon, because one Mr. Wilkins, a very eloquent man, for reasons best known to himself, assured them, that it was much a better climate than their own.

As to the mere *popular cry* on this subject, examine it impartially, and you will find it proceeded from a very small proportion of the people indeed, and of that part of the people too who are the least capable to judge, and the least disposed to be satisfied. But as their number was very small, they were obliged to raise their voice the louder, in order to make themselves heard. Peace and industry are ever *silent*; discontent and disorder

der are ever *clamorous*; and you know very well that ten men (or even ten women) that are clamorous, make a greater noise than ten thousand who are satisfied and silent. But indeed when a man talks of the *voice of the people*, he is very apt to mean the voice of those people who echo back his own voice.

Now, Sir, I say wherever the people collectively have given an opinion in favour of Reform, they have spoken by a decided *minority* of the voters in the place whose sense they would convey: and the public opinion on this subject is conspicuous in the elections of Delegates to the National Congress. I do not mean to say one word as to the legality or illegality of that measure: that has been already sufficiently explained. I know too that several respectable Gentlemen were elected to that Assembly; I only speak of it at present merely as it bears testimony to the national sentiment; and when we consider the *manner* of the elections, where they *were* held, and the number of places where *no such* were held at all, it is impossible not to conclude that the sense of the nation was adverse to the measure. It was admitted that the whole province of Munster sent no Delegate; and I am sure every county or city within my knowledge, which elected Delegates, elected them by a decided minority of those entitled by law to vote for Representatives.

The Hon. Member who introduced this Bill knows very well the election for the county in which he resides was not held even in the body of the county itself; it was held in another county, where the freeholders had not a right by law to exercise the elective franchise, even under the *King's writ*; and though I do allow that five respectable Gentlemen were the object of their choice, yet no man alive will say that the sense of 1200 freeholders was expressed by an assembly convened out of their county, and composed of 30, or 40, or 50 of those freeholders, and the populace of a large city.

We are all very well acquainted with the manner in which the election for the *metropolis* was conducted. I do not mean any disrespect to the Gentlemen that were elected; I dare say they were very worthy of the trust; but the manner was this;—after several unsuccessful attempts in the usual place of election, it was, by a sort of popular *cartiorari*, removed to a place never before resorted to, as the *seat of election*, though it has lately been the scene of *summary justice*. A part of the city, perhaps recommended by the popularity of its name—it is called *the Liberty*—or, perhaps, preferred to all others, from an opinion that in that centre of peace and industry, in that sacred suburb, diversity of opinion would be silenced; that the friends of experiment were sure

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to find a decisive support, and that though the election might not be perfectly *free*, it would certainly be *unanimous*. I shall not trouble you with a description of other elections throughout this country, but submit it to the observations of Gentlemen to judge in general what testimonies they bore of the national opinion.

The grand *aggregate body* were indeed liberal and comprehensive in their invitations; they looked to the East and the West, and the North and the South all at once; but unfortunately the whole kingdom was not at that time sufficiently informed, *as they are now*, that the great men who conducted and enlightened that assembly, were really persons whose condition in life gave them an authority, and whose education that degree of knowledge, which could entitle them to stand up and talk to the nation about a change of its Constitution: the summons, therefore, was disregarded,—those who were bidden refused to come,—one would not come “because he had a piece of ground—another would not come because he had five yoke of oxen—another would not come because he had got a wife;”—(and excellent reasons in my opinion for not coming!) I will not say that on these refusals they sent out into the streets and lanes of the city, into the highways and hedges for guests, because I know respectable guests were gotten; but this I must say, that
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their elections afterwards became so concise and summary, that if the sense of the nation had not been decidedly against the measure, it is impossible the House should not have filled.

Now, Sir, as to the interference of the people at large on every political question, I am willing to allow it every extent consistent with our form of government. The people have a right to declare their opinions on public measures, and to expect from us every thing in our power to promote their real happiness; they are entitled to our love while they behave well; they are entitled to the protection of the laws whilst they obey them, and they are entitled to liberty whilst they will share it with others. But the constitution and the laws, and the nature of things have drawn a line, and fixed a boundary to their interference in state; they are the object of all government, but not government itself; whenever they have been so their dominion has been tyranny, and the public condition unhappiness. It is very true, *human nature* is the same in all degrees of men, but *education* and *intercourse* enlighten some minds above others, and men must be exalted on some little eminence, above the level of the community, to look far, and judge of remote objects; but when you observe men of low rank and condition; the *obscure*, the *ignorant* and the *desperate*, desirous to step into a sphere to which they are inadequate,

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you may be sure the state is disordered. If the man that cleans your shoes were to aspire at that chair which you fill with so much ability, you would laugh at the absurdity, if you were not controuled in your mirth, by the reflection "that it was a symptom of *public disorder*."

Thus much as to the national opinion!—I shall now trouble you with a few words as to the measure itself, and the occasion that calls for it.

Before you submit to these *projects of alteration*;—Before you venture to stake your whole capital of Constitution on the *bazard of this die*; consider over and over again, and deliberate maturely on the necessity that impells you to it; for it would be madness to incur the dangers that must follow any constitutional change, the consequences of which no man living can foresee, unless it were to remove some real and pressing grievance;—now let me ask the most enthusiastic admirer of civil liberty, what grievance has he to complain of? Is it a grievance, that in the course of three years you have obtained the restitution of every right, and the confirmation of every charter, which have exalted the British Constitution above all others in the world?—that the whole range of your wishes has been consulted, and every wish complied with?—Is it a grievance that your judicature is your own; your army your own; your judges independent; your commerce free; and your parliament

liament supreme? It *may* be a grievance to *some*, that these benefits were accomplished without *blood-shed*, and that the lottery of *public commotion* has not been opened to every desperate adventurer! If this be a grievance, it is the only one I know of; and as to the constitutional *balance* of the state, can any man complain that the *popular part* is suppressed in its functions, or that it is too *weak* for the hand of power? Look abroad through the community, and tell me do you see any abridged in the exercise of civil liberty, and do you not see several in the exercise of the most abominable licentiousness? Destroying the landmarks that ascertain *property*, and the bounds that divide free government from anarchy?—State the course or current of power as you please! you can find no argument for this measure. If you attribute your late acquisitions to the justice of the Crown, or the integrity of your Parliament, you find *there* no necessity for reform. If, on the other hand (as some Gentlemen are fonder to do) you attribute them to the *high power of the people*, you find *there* no argument for a measure, the sole object of which must be to increase that power already predominant; and in the exercise of which the people have not of late discovered much discretion.

But the great evil which disturbs the mind of every *street politician*, and interrupts the labours
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of every *speculative artificer*—that great evil which has acquired a name, which is echo'd from one end of the country to the other, and is, like every other *sound*, echo'd, because it is unsubstantial—that consummation of all evil is the *aristocracy*—the *baneful aristocracy*!—Why, Sir, that is a very fine word; it is derived from the Greek language; and therefore very prudently introduced, as being unintelligible to the unlearned multitude: But indeed I must say that the spirit of equality which distinguishes the present time, has communicated the misconception of this word to all ranks of people who have publicly made use of it—they do not mean by aristocracy (as Locke or Montesquieu would) the power vested in the nobles, or great men—No, Sir, they mean by it particular influence which some individuals have acquired in the election of members to serve in Parliament.

Now let me ask any man of sense, or any man of knowledge, whether he thinks, since the creation of the world, there ever was, or ever could have been, a free state, in which the exercise or application of liberty could be so guarded, as that individuals must not either from *property*, from *talents*, from *residence*, from the capacity to *serve*, or the capacity to *deceive*, have acquired a degree of influence in elections, beyond the measure of equality, or the letter of the Constitution; and in

many cases beyond the reach of competition? It ever has been, and it ever must be the case; and no plan of parliamentary reform that has ever yet been imagined, has had the smallest tendency to prevent it. I will indeed do them the justice to say, they all affect to transfer it; to wrest this influence from the present possessors; but if that were accomplished, every body knows that after the morals of the people shall have been *reformed*, and the public peace and industry improved by a few years of election controversy, and riot, and corruption, this same influence must repose again in some hands or other; and it cannot be imagined that some men do not at this day indulge their hopes as to the favoured spot to which this influence may shift its residence.—The reformists do not appear desirous, and they certainly do not endeavour to take measures for its extinction, because they must know, what every body knows, that as long as men have the faculties of freedom, they will use it according to their fancy, abuse it according to their profligacy, or commute it according to their interest; until you can make the mass of mankind universally wise, and universally pure.

But I am not afraid to say, there is a degree of influence operating universally, arising from property, and other sources too, which our Constitution would not blush to recognize; and the power of the aristocracy (as it is called) if it be
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rooted in your soil; if it grows out of *your land*, will, like a great tree, give strength, and stability, and shelter to the earth that sustains it; and History will teach you that this influence, of which you complain, has often proved the great interposition between the Crown and the People; and has been highly instrumental in preserving to this day the best Constitution in the world, with which your inconsistency seems dissatisfied, and which your rashness would commit to the hazard of experiment.

It has been said the enemies of reform must admit, "that the representation is *imperfect*; and that it is unreasonable a small town should send as many representatives as a large district." I answer, if by *imperfect* you mean *unequal*, it ever has been and ever must be so.—Personal equality of representation (which is the only equality of representation I can conceive) would be a pure democracy; which, thank God! is not our Constitution; and in a country like our's, where the great majority of the people do not profess the religion of the state, it would be a democracy subversive of the laws and religion established.—The partial representation you complain of is not only involved in the principles of our Constitution, but (what some may think stronger) stands recognized in all your plans of *parliamentary reform*. For if you have any settled principle, and equality be

your principle, how can you justify your concession, that a borough of 40 inhabitants shall send to Parliament as many Members as a county containing 7000 freeholders? You cannot object to inequality as evil, and produce a remedy subject to the same objection. And as to the present decayed condition of some places now entitled to representation, I shall only say, if you were to change the construction of Parliament with every change of condition in every place endowed with the privilege of election, there would be an end to the strength and stability of your Constitution. And if your ancestors had indulged their speculations in such experiments, the illustrious fabric of the British Constitution would have been centuries ago levelled to the ground; and you would not at this day be debating in a free Parliament, under the protection of a form of government, which, with all its *inequalities*, is the admiration of the world; and which, with all its *imperfections*, is a thousand times *more perfect* than any plan offered for its reform—a Constitution whose inequality of representation satisfied the wisdom of your ancestors, and rewarded the magnanimity of those patriots who accomplished the glorious Revolution.

But it raises the indignation of Gentlemen to hear that seats in Parliament have been bought and sold!—I say whenever that has happened it has been an abuse of the elective franchise, and a violation
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of the law; and if it has ever come to the hon. Member's knowledge that such practice has taken place, he ought to lay his hand on that particular borough. But if you would extinguish a general franchise because in a particular instance it has been abused, I beg to know where you would stop; for if you admit this principle, it would lead you on to extinguish the freeholder's right to vote in counties, the citizens right to vote in cities, and by degrees to abolish every privilege that distinguishes a freeman, because every such privilege may be abused.

In judging of our great Constitution, we deceive ourselves by entering into *narrow detail* or *abstract principles*. The British Constitution is a great object to be seen, *through its general effects*, and felt by the *benefits it confers*. It is like those great luminaries which are so far removed from common inspection, that they are not to be viewed with a microscopic eye. They diminish in their size, and recede from you when you attempt to examine them through artificial mediums.

And now, Sir, a few words as to the outline of the honourable Member's Bill, as he has been pleased to lay it before you. By his description it must bear a strong family likeness to that which we disposed of in the last session. Indeed I believe I might go farther, and say it is the very same, with the addition of one year's growth.

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Its size may be larger, and its dress somewhat different; but its features, its character, its complexion and disposition nearly the same. And I freely confess, I wonder not to find it more improved, considering it has had not only the advantage of the ablest *private tuition* that this country could afford, but also the assistance of several *public academies*, several *learned seminaries*, which have been lately instituted in this country for the sole purpose of *its education*.

Yet, Sir, highly favoured as the system thus has been, I will freely confess, that it does not seem entitled to any greater degree of approbation, than what it may have merited at any former period; its *parts* are still inconsistent with the *whole*, and its operations inadequate to the end proposed. It professes to establish an *equal* Representation, whilst it introduces a degree of *inequality* infinitely beyond what at present exists. Actuated solely by that *spirit of innovation*, whence it derives its origin, it contracts, with daring hand, the *basis of legislation*. By its superfluity of regulation it would lessen the number of constituents,—by the motion now before you, it would diminish that of the representatives.—How far this *contracting principle* agrees with the professions of those who support the measure, I shall leave the House to determine. But, as its tendency is, in my opinion, not to *settle* on a footing of permanence, but

but to *disturb*, for interested purposes, the harmony of the Constitution, I shall conclude with saying, that under these circumstances, whether offered in the *whole* or by *detail*, it shall meet with my most determined opposition.

After a great number of Members had delivered their sentiments on the subject, the question being put, Mr. Flood's motion was negatived without a division.

